

the Hollywood Working Writer Write

presents

A Mini Course in Screenwriting

The purpose of this short discussion is to describe and demonstrate some of the critical elements of the screenplay, especially those pertaining to the Act I setup. We'll start with the Premise. Unless you fully understand the concept of Premise, what it is and how to use it, then you are automatically stepping off on the wrong foot and your screenplay will almost invariably become increasingly unfocused as you move deeper into your second Act. If that last part sounds all too arcane, please bear with me and I'll offer some specific illustrations.

Let's begin with the opening two pages of an actual screenplay:

FADE IN:

EXT. THE BORDER - NIGHT

Six men, CHOLOS, make their way silently alongside a 12 foot high chain link fence. A sign on the fence reads, U.S. - MEXICO BORDER.

Tagging along behind is JOSE, 12-years-old, wearing clean jeans and his best shirt. He clutches a small, wicker suitcase. His scroungy old dog, SANCHEZ, is with him.

At last they find what they're looking for -- a shallow depression in the earth under the fence. The men begin to crawl under, one at a time. The opening is tight and it takes some effort to get through. As Jose is about to take his turn, the last man shoves him aside and scurries under. Now Jose starts to shimmy under, dragging his suitcase with him, when Sanchez takes his turn, stepping on Jose and clogging the narrow opening momentarily until boy and dog finally manage to squeeze through.

The men have gone on, giving Jose no thought whatsoever, and Jose runs to catch up. He catches one of the men and whispers:

JOSE

We are in the U.S. now?

CHOLO

Si. There's a road up ahead. The man will be waiting for us.

Now, a WHISPERED SHOUT from another cholo:

VOICE

La Migra!

A patrol car is coming with a searchlight. The men drop to the ground.

JOSE

lies flat, his face in the dirt. He pulls Sanchez to the ground with him and whispers SSSHHH.

A SEARCHLIGHT fans over the brush and scrub landscape until, finally, the car moves on and disappears into darkness. The men rise and proceed northward.

LATER - ON A ROAD

An old, rattletrap van waits with a man, GUTIERREZ, 40's, leaning against it. The cholos begin appearing out of the darkness and Gutierrez tells them:

GUTIERREZ

Let's go, move it! This road's dangerous. Fifty dollars. Everyone pay, let's go.

The men each pay Gutierrez and he motions them into the back doors of the windowless van. Jose arrives.

GUTIERREZ

Price is the same. Fifty dollars. Even for muchachos.

Jose digs into his pocket and hands the man the roll of bills he has ready. As Gutierrez counts it...

GUTIERREZ

What do you want in the U.S. kid? You're too young to work the fields.

JOSE

I come not to work... I come to find somebody.

GUTIERREZ

(looks him up and down)

Get in.

Okay, I'm going to stop right here. We'll look at the end of this scene in a moment, but first I want us to examine in detail what has been presented thus far.

The page and a half you just read contain an extraordinary amount of information. Probably more than you are even consciously aware of. Think of a script as a "document of information" intended to create imagery in the mind of the reader. There are literally hundreds of bits of image-producing datum contained in this scene. But for our purposes, there are four major items we want to talk about now. What are they?

The first major piece of information conveyed here is: **The introduction of the hero.** That's important, isn't it? Certainly we have to know who the hero is. Jose is our hero. He's a 12-year-old Mexican boy wearing clean clothes, carrying a suitcase and accompanied by his dog. As a sidebar, notice I gave no physical description of Jose. Is it necessary to say he has big brown eyes and black hair? Didn't you already get that image when I said he's a 12-year-old boy named Jose? Certainly a physical description of a character is often necessary, only here, I felt it wasn't. Let's move on.

The second major piece of information: **Placing the hero in the world.** In the scene, we find the group moving along a fence labeled U.S.- Mexico Border. They crawl under the fence and we can rightly presume they have entered the U.S. illegally. So now we have located our hero in the world. He is somewhere on the border of the U.S. and Mexico. At the same time, we learn something of his circumstances; he is in the U.S. illegally. Do we say any of this verbally? No. All of this vital information is conveyed *visually*.

Next, I want you to recall the line when Gutierrez tells Jose he's too young to work the fields. What does Jose respond? "I come not to work... I come to find somebody." Now then, that single, simple, unadorned line gives us everything we need to create the third major piece of information:

The Premise. And here's where I want to take some time to discuss the single most important writer's tool you have. Remember this definition throughout your writing career -- the Premise is a short declarative sentence stating precisely what your story is about. That's it. Nothing complicated. (And don't confuse it with logline which is a *selling* tool. The two are different.) The premise should be stated in 10 words or less. And it must achieve a certain purpose. That is, **the Premise identifies the hero and his want, need or desire** which leads to a **goal**. Examples: Indy WANTS to find the lost Ark. Captain Miller WANTS to save Private Ryan. Clarice Starling NEEDS to catch Hannibal Lecter. In any cop story the cop always WANTS to catch the killer. In a love story the boy always DESIRES the girl. In our story, Jose WANTS to find someone. (Later we'll discover he is searching for his father but we don't need to throw everything at the audience in the beginning.) Another example: An old woman WANTS to maintain her independence despite her declining years. Now that premise sounds enormously boring on the surface, but DRIVING MISS DAISY won Best Picture of the Year in 1989. A good writer can make almost any concept work. So you see, the concept or premise is rarely the cause of a screenplay's failure. Success always depends upon your *execution*.

Logically, the only way you can create a strong, compelling, focused screenplay is if you know exactly what it is you want to say. And you can only know that if you can verbally state your premise. We'll talk in a moment about how to make your story compelling.

But first let's recap and examine those first three vital pieces of information we derived from the first page and a half of the script presented earlier.

Jose, a 12-year-old Mexican boy, has entered
the U.S. illegally in order to find someone.

There it is. The whole story is set up in the first page and a half of the script. The audience knows who the hero is and what he WANTS. They know the goal and so long as I keep my premise in sight while writing the remainder of the script, I will have a focused, concise screenplay (but not necessarily a compelling one).

Remember this, the audience likes to know early what the story is about otherwise they get uncomfortable. They'll squirm in their seats trying to figure out what's going on. Example: In THE GREEN MILE, a prison guard (Tom Hanks) DESIRES to save an innocent man from execution. That's the premise, right? Trouble is, the premise is developed so late in the second act, the audience has trouble following the story. For half the movie, we have a hero (Tom Hanks) who has no want, need or desire. He doesn't know that John is innocent until given the "vision" and only then does he acquire the "desire" to save an innocent man. It's very late in coming and the audience doesn't have a handle on the story until that moment. The only reason this story works is because the characters are so *compelling*, we stay with them long enough to see what is going to happen.

Compelling. That's a great word and one you should have in your frontal lobe at all times while at the keyboard BECAUSE... even though you create a hero with a worthy or significant goal, your characters and events must be compelling or WE DON'T CARE. There it is. I just said it. I just stated the single reason far-and-away for most screenplay failures. Consider this: The writer introduces an admirable hero. The hero has a clearly stated and worthy goal. Fine so far. Now here comes the BIG BUT... Far too often THE READER DOESN'T CARE about the hero or his goal because character and events are UNCOMPELLING. More plainly stated the story is BORING. And this is invariably due to underdeveloped characters and all-too-familiar situations. The writer hasn't created anyone or anything new!

The three questions you must always ask concerning any story are: Who is the hero? What does he/she want? And **why do we care?** Therefore, your story will be compelling ONLY if we are so "endeared" to the characters, that for two hours, their fate is the most important thing in our lives. Rocky's goal is not to defeat Apollo Creed. He knows he can't. He only WANTS to go the distance. Do we care? Oh my, yes! That's why we are screaming and laughing through our tears when the final bell sounds and Rocky, a bloody pulp, is still on his feet. He lost the fight. BUT he achieved his goal. He went the distance. Why did we care? Because the writer and filmmakers spent the previous two hours teaching us about Rocky and his indomitable spirit. We learned to love Rocky and want more than anything else in the world (forget the electric bill and past due mortgage payment on our houses) for Rocky to "go the distance."

Now let's return to Jose's story. We know that Jose, a 12-year-old Mexican boy, is in the U.S. illegally on a mission to find someone. But how do we "feel" about Jose right now? Do we feel any particular emotion towards this boy whatsoever? Probably not. And that's because all of the information we've gotten about him so far has been essentially *intellectual*. It all went straight to the brain.

Please read the remainder of the scene:

Now Gutierrez sees the dog and kicks at him.

GUTIERREZ

VAMOS!

JOSE

Senor, he is my dog!

GUTIERREZ

Neh, neh, I don't carry animals. He stays.

JOSE

Senor, he would die!

GUTIERREZ

Not my problem! I gotta worry about the next patrol car. Get in!

JOSE

No, senor.

Gutierrez is furious. He slams the van doors closed.

GUTIERREZ

Then you can both die out here!

Gutierrez shoots the boy a scornful look and goes to open the cab of his van. But stops. And looks once more at Jose.

GUTIERREZ

Last chance!

Jose holds to the scruff of Sanchez' neck and shakes his head no. So Gutierrez climbs into the van and it speeds off down the road.

ON JOSE

his big, disbelieving eyes watching the van race away. The boy's heart sinks to his stomach. He's stranded here, lost and defenseless. The smuggler is right. They will surely die left alone in this wilderness. But then...

WIDER

as the brake lights on the van light up and the vehicle skids to a stop on the gravel dirt road. A look of immense relief fills Jose's face and he and Sanchez run to catch up.

There. That's the end of the scene. And in it I've presented you with more vital information. Did you recognize it? What, then, is the fourth most important piece of information contained in the scene? It's this:

Jose loves his dog. Yup, that's it. This sweet, simple sequence wherein Jose risks his life and his goal because he refuses to abandon a 39 cent dog to certain death in the wilderness speaks volumes about Jose's character. And, most importantly, it is information that is aimed not at the intellect, but *straight at the heart*.

Now let me illustrate why that little event was so important to me as the writer. Consider for a moment that the scene is rewritten and Jose reluctantly agrees to leave Sanchez behind. He tearfully squats and rubs the old dog's ears and tells him adios.

Then he gets in the van and watches soulfully out the window the dog receding in the distance as the van speeds away. Okay, intellectually, we might all agree that was a prudent decision on Jose's part. But *emotionally*, how do we feel about him? I don't think we like him very much. And I as the writer view that fact as the kiss of death. Do I want the audience to dislike or, at best, feel indifference towards my hero? OH GOSH NO! I want the audience to *adore* my hero, to love and feel palpable empathy for him. And the *only* way to accomplish this is to create scenes *showing* us the character in behavior that *endears* us to him (characters are revealed more strongly through their actions than their words). That's why that little half page sequence wherein Jose risks it all for his dog is priceless to me as a writer and is the kind of scene you must constantly be looking for when writing your own stories.

A discussion about "how to make your story compelling" is nowhere complete without examining the nature of **drama**. After all, the words *dramatic* and *compelling* are synonyms, aren't they? It's been said **the three components of drama are conflict, conflict and conflict**. Never forget that. Conflict creates drama. Without conflict, you have no story. Now if that sounds like some sort of academic axiom, then so be it. I call it a truism. It is something a good writer instinctively knows and uses consistently as a tool. My advice is to **infuse your story with conflict at every opportunity**. Consider this:

We rewrite our scene once again. This time Gutierrez tells Jose to get in. Jose and Sanchez hop into the van and the van drives away, end of scene. In other words, I've left out the little sequence in which Gutierrez refuses to take the dog. So now what do we have? Well, we still have a scene that introduces the hero (Jose), places him in the world (he's in the U.S. illegally), and identifies his goal (he has come to find someone). As I stated earlier, this is all intellectual information that is planted in the brain. But because we've left out the "dog drama" this time, there is, unfortunately, no "emotion" attached to the scene. Not good. Think of every scene you write as an opportunity to reveal or display facets of your characters in order to accomplish the desired goal (i.e. *endear* us to the hero or cause us to *despise* the villain). No scene should be a "throwaway" used solely for the purpose of supplying exposition (the telling of raw information). **Put drama/conflict/confrontation into every scene**. Try to include it in every line of dialogue.

Notice how the dog sequence in the original scene *sparked emotion*, created *stronger interest* and *endeared* us to the hero all through the use of conflict. If your script gives us scene after scene of purely intellectual information that merely advances the story without giving us the necessary emotional charge that conflict provides, then you are boring us to death. Stop it! Put in the passion. Dig under the surface and create characters that live by charging your story with conflict, conflict and more conflict.

So there it is. In two pages I have set up a story about a brave and loveable kid who is taking great risks in order to find someone important to him. I have a hero with a worthy cause. The reader is with me. Now all I have to do is stay true to my premise, keep my character endearing and create compelling challenges to him on his journey toward his goal.

Now before we leave here, let me take a moment to clear up any confusion there may exist between the definitions of logline and premise. As stated earlier, the premise is a short, declarative sentence stating the bare-bones, essential thrust, arc or compelling drive of the story. Its purpose is to identify the hero and his want, need or desire necessary to create a goal. Rocky WANTS to go the distance. Batman WANTS to catch the Riddler. Captain Miller WANTS to save Private Ryan. Okay, hold on. Let's look closer at that last one and see how we might reduce the premise of SAVING PRIVATE RYAN even further. Consider this: A man WANTS to save another man.

There it is. It's that simple. In seven words I have boiled down the essence of that entire movie. Now answer this. Could I use this premise to *sell* the concept to a producer? The answer clearly is no, of course not. There's not enough there to sell. The premise is a *writer's* tool. Here's why. It is obvious to anyone that the writer must certainly know his premise from the beginning in order to maintain any focus and purpose to the story. Agreed? So knowing the premise is vital. ALSO, by locating the page on which the premise is revealed, the writer can determine if his premise comes too late in the story. Recall that I revealed my premise (Jose WANTS to find someone) on page 2 of my script. The premise of THE GREEN MILE (a prison guard DESIRES to save an innocent man) comes almost too late in that story. Now look at *your* screenplay. On what page does your hero acquire or divulge his goal emanating from his want, need or desire? Does it occur in the first act (hopefully)? If it comes much later, then it may be too late. Now consider this:

A squadron of eight men enters enemy lines to find and rescue a soldier who is the last remaining brother in a family who has sacrificed four sons to World War II.

This is the logline of SAVING PRIVATE RYAN. It is a *selling* tool used to sell the concept to a producer and ultimately to an audience. You can almost see this sentence at the bottom of a movie poster, can't you? So the differences between the simple premise and a full logline are obvious. Now let's look closer at the logline and see what we find. "A squadron of eight men..." These are our heroes. Captain Miller (Tom Hanks) is our central hero, the character we home in on, the star of the movie. But in actuality, the movie has eight co-heroes. What makes them co-heroes? They all share the same goal (to save Private Ryan). Let's look further at the logline. "...to find and rescue a soldier..." Okay, now we've identified the heroes' goal; to find and rescue a soldier. So now we discover that **the logline contains the story's premise**. It identifies the hero(es) and the goal (desire). But the logline contains even more. "...the squadron enters enemy lines" denotes action, jeopardy and danger. And the soldier they have gone to rescue, "is the last remaining brother in a family who has sacrificed four sons..." denotes high stakes and a worthy goal. And "World War II" sets the story in time and place. So clearly, there's a lot contained in this logline designed to *sell* the concept. And that's the difference between premise and logline.

Oh, oh, wait, wait. Only one more thing, I promise. What's the theme of SAVING PRIVATE RYAN? It's "duty". We see this theme portrayed from beginning to end. In the first 20 minutes of the film we watch the vivid depiction of the invasion of Normandy Beach. Now ask yourself, why did these young Americans, some only teenagers, hurl themselves into the face of almost certain death in a foreign land? The answer is, duty. Captain Miller is ordered to form a squadron and undertake a perilous mission through enemy lines to find Private Ryan. Does he or any of his men refuse the order? No. Do they obey because they know Ryan personally and feel devoted to saving his life? No. They accept the mission because they are soldiers and have a duty to obey. When at last they find Private Ryan and inform him they have come to escort him safely to the rear lines, what is Ryan's response? "I won't go!" He informs them he is a soldier and his duty is to remain and fight alongside the men in his company. So Miller and his squad stay also in order to protect him. Why? Out of their sense of duty.

More on the complex subject of theme at a later time. For now, I urge you to keep writing. And forgive my overuse of *italics* and **bold print**. I use them in perhaps an obnoxious attempt at emphasis but please, please never use them in your screenplays. Thank you.